

ABC Dadà, 1944
mixed media
21.5 x 31.5 cm

The Visible



Bruno Munari devoted his life to animating letters.

But **M** was no professional typographer.

Letter forms were for him toys and tools, signs and things, atomic particles and molecular compounds. They were the building blocks of a cosmos in which combinatory play is the signature of life.

ABC Dadà is just **1** of 6 major letter projects undertaken within the arc of Munari's 6-decade career as an artist, designer, and educator. Only **1** copy was made.

It was prefigured by *Abecedario di Munari* (1942): a square-format primer pairing letter forms with related words and **engraved** images. It was followed by **2** later letter books: *Alfabetiere – Facciamo assieme un libro da leggere secondo il metodo attivo* (1960), in which swarms of collaged letters, wedded to nonsensical nursery rhymes, invite additions on the part of readers, and *Bruno Munari's ABC* (1960), a playful primer composed in English.

1 + 2 = **3**.

ABC Dadà finds a multitude of echoes in Munari's other subsequent work, from the construction toy *ABC con fantasia* (1961), with its generative letter segments, to his 70s and 80s educational laboratories for children, with their exercises on signs as designs and designs as signs, to the *Alfabeto Lucini* (1987): a fantastic alphabet crafted to commemorate the sixty year anniversary of his longtime collaborators at the Stamperia Lucini. ✂

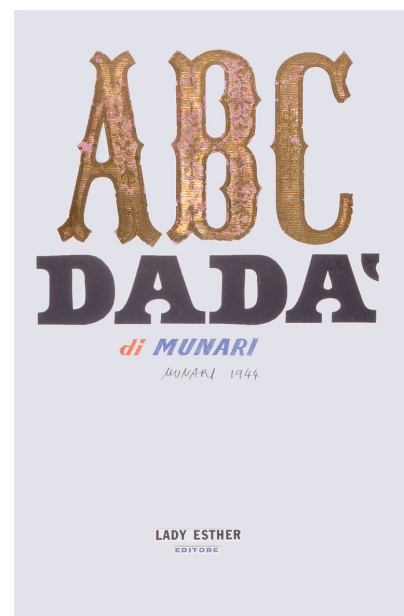
ABC Dadà + 3 = **4**.

Precedents and echoes aside, *ABC Dadà* remains something of an anomaly; an **X** factor within Munari's trajectory from Futurism to the multimodal design practice that he developed in the postwar era. Dating from 1944, it goes unpublished in the very year that its creator churned out no less than **7** children's books for Mondadori.

Y so?

Was it a gift destined for a friend? A **1**-off experiment intended for publication only by the imaginary Lady Esther publishing house? Was it too close to the 1942 abecedarium or too far removed from the storytelling vein of *Toc toc. Chi é? Apri la porta* (1945) to interest the likes of commercial publishing houses like Mondadori or Einaudi? Was it truly crafted for children given, for instance, that the noun *hegeliano*, employed to illustrate the letter H, is not exactly a honey-coated breakfast treat for tots?

Munari states only that the work was 'commissioned' but that, when completed, he realised that he had created an artwork and not a book. ♣



✂ *Abecedario di Munari* (Turin: Einaudi, 1942); *Alfabetiere – Facciamo assieme un libro da leggere secondo il metodo attivo* (Turin: Einaudi, 1960); *Bruno Munari's ABC* (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1960). On Munari's overall career as a book designer see G. Maffei, *Munari – I libri* (Milan: Sylvestre Bonnard, 2002).

✂ Some of these works are documented in G. Camuffo, M. Piazza and C. Vinti, *TDM5: Grafica italiana*, Triennale Design Museum (Mantua: Corraini, 2012) and G. Bianchino, *Bruno Munari: Il disegno, il design*, Centro Studi e Archivio della Comunicazione (Mantua: Corraini, 2008).

♣ On this topic see M. Hájek's essay 'Bruno Munari, *Futurista*' in the present catalogue.

An artwork for children or for all? *ABC Dadà* ends with XY **Zazà**, *Zazà* being a character from 1 Chronicles 2:33 whose Hebrew name signifies ‘belonging to all.’

* * *

Artwork or book, belonging to children or to all, what is certain is that, in harmony with Munari’s ludic approach to design and pedagogy, *ABC Dadà* throws a monkey wrench into the task of mastering one’s ABCs.

That monkey wrench is branded with the deviant **D** that = **Dadà**.

Why Dadà and not **Dada**?

Unaccented, the word is absent from Munari’s pre-*ABC Dadà* work, despite conspicuous debts to everything from Picabia’s imaginary machines to Man Ray’s photograms to Dada’s poetics of collage.

Accented, it surfaces in *ABC Dadà*’s title like the magnetic pointer of a creative compass, angled in the direction of **2 Ps**: Paris and Prampolini –**2 Ps** that between 1925 and 1937 were one.

2 = 1

The years in question are those during which Prampolini resided in the French capital and served as Munari’s main conduit to Dada and Surrealism, organising shows, building friendships, serving as an ambassador between the second generation Futurists and the local avant-gardes. (Ties to the Hexagon are confirmed by the tricolor title page where **di** and **MUNARI** flutter like flags against the backdrop of *la page blanche*).

This Parisian/Prampolinian genealogy appears to locate *ABC Dadà* squarely within the family tree of what a recent MOMA show has dubbed the ‘ecstatic alphabets’ of the avant-gardes.^③ Ecstatic alphabets have their roots in words-in-freedom experiments like Marinetti’s *Les mots en liberté futuristes* with their kaleidoscopic typographical arrays and free-expressive orthography. They draw additional sustenance from acoustical-graphic probes extending from Hugo Ball’s *Lautgedichten* to Kurt Schwitters’s *Ursonate* (Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa [laut] Bee bee bee bee bee - - - - - Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa Zee zee zee zee zee) to Surrealist glossolalic dabbings. They attain their pre-digital apogee in postwar settings familiar to Munari, from Concretism to Letterism to Fluxus.

The fierce foliage on this family tree is varied. But there’s a common trunk: an approach to language **Q**ua fab lab.



③ Dexter Sinister (D. Reinfurt, S. Bailey), *Ecstatic Alphabets/Heaps of Language*, edited with A. Keefer (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012).

Language understood as a medium that can be freely moulded as graphic/acoustical/kinetic stuff unconstrained by grammatical or semantic laws.

Language that can be built, danced, sculpted, acted out.

* * *

Tacked on almost like an *arrière pensée*, the gallic D that completes the title of *ABC Dadà* is only part of the Munari story.

The main story line remains bound to scholastic challenges of an elementary sort: learning **A B C**s, minding one's **P**s and **Q**s, mastering **R**eading **wR**iting & **aR**ithmetic. These Munari takes on with affinities for notions of active, experiential and integral learning being theorised by educational thinkers such as Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget and reformers associated with the Gestalt movement, not to mention with a lingering love (shared with the likes of Max Ernst) for the material culture, popular illustrated press, and children's literature of the second half of the 19th century.

Ecstatic or not, Munari's alphabets are eclectic. They do not aim to fully explode the world of writing or to reduce all language to graphic/acoustical/kinetic matter. Rather, they set out to explain and explore, approaching tasks of instruction with a gentle Surrealist-inflected Dada touch.

Assemblage, collage, photomontage, the disjunctive use of cuts and pastes all find their place in Munarian abecedaria alongside conventional illustrative techniques. They are placed in dialogue with some of the richest veins of 19th and early 20th century didactic play and experimentation, exemplified by masterpieces like Edward Lear's *Facsimile of a Nonsense Alphabet*, composed in 1846 (but published in 1926), rhyme books like Jules Lemaître's *ABC Petits Contes* (1919), and rebus games à la Lewis Carroll.

The resulting primers are functional primers (or, at least, *functional enough*). They deliver standard letter sequences paired with nursery rhymes, riddles, rebuses, illustrations, clippings, cutting and real-world keepsakes. They also manage to be **F**uturist **f**ast, **D**ada **d**aft and **S**urrealist **s**wervy

(and a bit **m**ischievous & **f**un).

The lesson plan proposed by *ABC Dadà* is both serious and unserious, conventional and unconventional. Structured around single page units, it includes no bleeds, no overlaps, no carryovers: just a title page + **21** centered layouts each composed of a precut, embroidered **GOLDEN LETTER**, a label with a typewritten alliterative ditty, an etched figure (most are cropped from 19th century sources), and a cluster of found objects. All are illustrative of the letter being brought to life.



The objects are small and lie nearly flat, casting only the slightest of shadows in this shallow, unheroic theater of the everyday. They are arrayed along a perpendicular axis

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o f r e a d i n g .



Every letter in *ABC Dadà* has an **engraved** portrait and a proper name (except for the haughty **H** doubly impersonated by an *hidalgo* and a young Hegelian). The name

Andrea serves as the book's alpha [α]; the name Zazà as the book's omega [Ω]. There are **9** male and **10** female characters in between. $\frac{1}{2}$ are children and $\frac{1}{2}$ are adults.

The older-younger balance is carried over onto the lexical level.

Some of Munari's typewritten clips fall unambiguously within the field of children's nonsense poetry:

Francesca affacciata alla finestra
fra fiori finti e fotografie
è affezionata alle forbicine.



[Francesca facing out of the fenestration
amidst fake flowers and photographs
has become fond of the fine little scissors]

or

Gigi gioca in ginocchio coi giunchi
nelle grotte ghiacciate dal gelo.



[Gigi plays games with reeds on his knees
in the glacially gelid grottos]

Other clips employ more intricate vocabulary in the service of rigorous alliterative regimes

Ubaldo è un uomo umido,
egli ha un uncino unto
e tutti gli utensili uniti.



[Ubaldo is a humid human
who has a unctuous hitch up
and all his utensils unified]

or

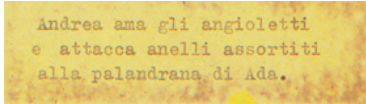
Zitti zitti,
suoniamo lo zufolo
che zazà ammazza le zanzare
con la zampa.



[Zzshsh, Zzshsh,
lets play our wood whistle
while Zazà is zapping mosquitos
with her paw]



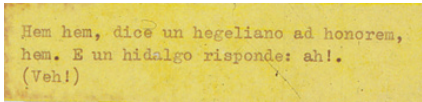
Others mix verbal registers straddling the worlds of child and adult, like the ditty that accompanies the letter A, with its 18th century frock coat:



[Andrea adores little angels
and attaches assorted annulets
to Ada's frock coat]



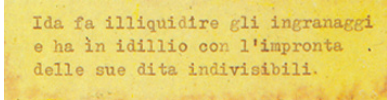
A final category ventures out into purely adult terrain either with respect to vocabulary



[Hem, hem, says an honorary Hegelian,
hem. An hidalgo replies: ahh!
(Ho hum!)]



or with respect to content



[Ida liquefies gears
and has an illicit fling with the imprint
of her indivisible fingers.]



The clippings are paired with fragments of domesticity as well as with items commonly found in children's pockets (like sticks, stickers and stones).

Camillo appears in the company of five small seashells and an encircling cord.

Dante is seen with a child's pencil drawing of a dromedary and a pair of dice.

Three ivy leaves have been glued onto **Enea's** page along with a commercial blank label and snip of an elastic waistband.

Artificial flowers flank **Francesca**, along with scissors from a sewing kit and 2 frames from a contact sheet.

Sewing is well represented: by buttons, a skein of green wool, a pink knit rectangle, a black ribbon, white lace borders, various fabric samples. So are other arts and crafts like watch making (balance wheels, clock faces), mosaics (an octagonal micro-mosaic pin), woodworking (wood fragments), drawing (a pencil, assorted pen nibs), music (a flageolet flute) and finger painting (a polychrome handprint).

The inclusion of so many real-world domestic objects and collaged-in print materials launches *ABC Dadà* out of the orbit of standard abecedaria into that of Victorian scrapbook and keepsake books. Yet the keepsakes are in the service of a disjunctive countertermnemonics.

For all of its air of everydayness and domesticity, the Munarian scrapbook forms no cohesive portrait of a private world. It never gels into a Collection. Incongruities prevail, both subtle and overt.

The nuclear family whose life *ABC Dadà* documents includes an *hidalgo* as well as nannies and grandmas; its zoo features mosquitoes as well as dromedaries and hippos.

Metal pen nibs and pencils frolic with typewritten and **INDUSTRIALLY PRINTED** words.

engraved and hand-drawn images hover side-by-side with photographic **positives** and **negatives**.

Innocent pebbles, sticks and shells dance in and out of suggestive scraps of lace, veils and fur, and even a bustier (in what amounts to a replay of Munari's own tactile tables from the early 1930s).

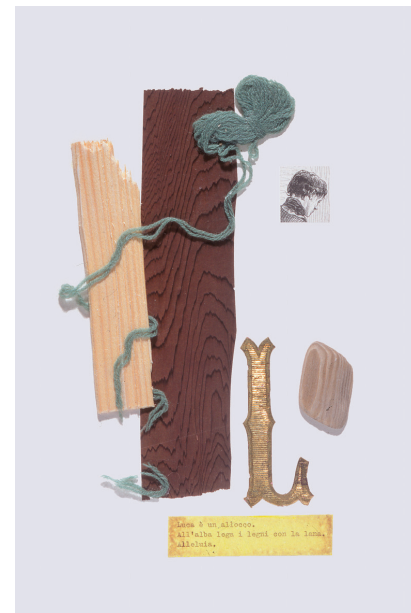
Soft and sensual fabrics collide with sharp-edge fragments of woven wire (a piece of fencing?).

In this work about writing *nothing is hand-written* (aside from Munari's signature on the title page). There is little that is properly typographical.

Here is an abecedarium made up of letters that are themselves things: **things** found and glued, **things** in the midst of other **things, things** that make you think.

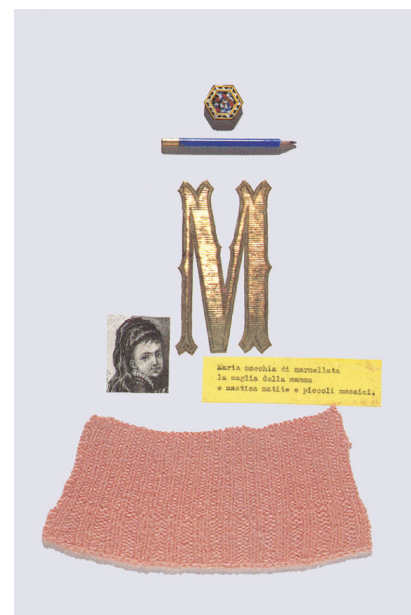
* * *

Artwork + book, primer + playground wrapped into a single package, *ABC Dadà* extends an invitation to 'reading' to children and adults. But within the playhouse of its pages, reading casts aside its autonomy in order to recover its place within a vaster family of forms of making and doing.



Refreshed and renewed many times over in the course of Munari's remarkable career, the invitation tendered by *ABC Dadà* is **to read** in much the same way that we

Animate,
Build,
Crop,
Dance,
Ecclipse,
Fold,
un**G**lue,
Highlight,
Image,
Juggle,
Knot,
Listen,
Mix,
Nail,
Observe,
Palp,
Question,
pop**R**ivet,
Snell,
Tear,
Upend,
Ventriloquise,
re**W**rite,
Xerox,
Yodel,
and **Z**oom.



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